

# EDDIE CHAMBERS

## AN INTERVIEW WITH PETRINE ARCHER-STRAW

**Petrine Archer-Straw** – *Eddie, you have a reputation, as both a radical black artist and a radical black curator. In fact, in your most recent catalogues you have employed the slogan 'No art but Black art. No war but Class War.'* Could you expand on this?

**Eddie Chambers** – Well, I think the 'No war but Class War' part is probably self-evident, or self-explanatory. In terms of 'No art but Black art,' what I'm trying to say is what I've been saying for a number of years now: that the only kind of art that is important in the black community, is art that focuses on the black struggle and sees itself as an integral part of our struggle against racism. So really the slogan is a summary of the idea that our art should have a politicised agenda.

*You suggest that 'No war but Class War' is fairly self-evident, but surely that links the black community and black art within a larger framework of revolutionary struggle.*

– Yes, it does. That's true, I can't really add anything else to what you've said, it does add a class dimension to our struggle.

*Your term also suggests that black art must be prioritised. How do you go about doing that in your curatorial practice?*

– In terms of the exhibitions I curate, I'm always trying to seek out artists, who I think, address that call for a politicised art form. So that's my starting point, seeking out artists whose works address the black experience and black concerns. Then, the focus shifts to how I can find an outlet for that work. There is an issue here regarding a process of alienation, between the black community and black artists, which has not yet been fully addressed.

*Yes, I realise you're doing a lot of work especially in regions where there are black communities, has this been something that you've done from choice, or is it because you've had difficulties getting black art accepted in mainstream London institutions?*

– I have to say that I think, in the years I've been curating, my ability to get shows within London has been abysmal. I mean, obviously there are a few exceptions – it's not been a wholly bleak picture – but it has been very difficult to get shows within London. Generally speaking, it's been much easier to get shows in the north of England. The area between West Midlands and the North East, has been the region which has been most receptive to my work.

I think it's very difficult to see any aspect of what I do as being free from tensions and contradictions. I think there are a number of different issues inherent in exhibiting black art. Certain

galleries have a notion that they don't need black exhibitions because they don't have a large enough black community in the area to merit it. I don't think it's acceptable for a gallery to say that. On the other hand, when galleries situated in regions with a large black community do have black exhibitions, it probably suits an ultimately racist agenda, in terms of fulfilling a token slot. I have a lot of problems with tokenism, as if the provision of one or two specifically black shelves somehow addresses the needs and the concerns of the black community. On one level I'm really pleased with increasing opportunities to exhibit, but on another level I don't think the motives are always acceptable. So I think these tensions and difficulties, resulting from art world racism in various forms, are never far from my work.

*You've actually had a successful record of exhibitions in the past five years or so. How long have you been practising as a curator?*

– I began organising exhibitions in 1981, and I started to curate exhibitions in 1987. I make a distinction between organising and curating, in that when I was organising exhibitions, from the early to mid-80s, it was a case of showing a group of young black artists and art students, and I included my own work in that. It was round about 1986-87 that I made a conscious choice to move from having an active involvement in the exhibitions, to being somebody who curated.

*And through this curatorial practice, do you have your own agenda, in terms of the issues that need to be addressed?*

– Oh, very much so. Again, there are difficulties there that I'm aware of, because I believe the artist's concerns and priorities have to come first, but in a way I set the agenda, in the way I construct my exhibitions, especially ones that have a very strong subject matter. For example, the exhibition about the British flag<sup>1</sup> that I did in 1993, that was wholly my construction, and obviously there was a lot of work which reinforced and supported the arguments I was putting forward. Essentially, it's an interventionist role for a curator, it's not just in response to what's out there. There's also an element of commissioning work, for instance, asking an artist to make work about the Union Jack rather than just making a selection from work that already exists.

*And what are the major themes that your curatorial work has addressed in the past? You've mentioned the 'Black People and the British Flag' exhibition. What else have you felt needed to be addressed urgently?*

– Well, in 1994 I did an exhibition called 'Us and Dem'<sup>2</sup>, which was an exhibition that attempted to explore some of the relationships between the black community and the police, because I think the issue of the black community's relationship with the police, the judiciary and the criminal justice system is of critical importance. And I was interested in focusing on the work of a number of artists whose work, I thought, addressed those issues. Another exhibition, which I worked on awhile ago, was 'History and Identity'<sup>3</sup>, because I think the notion of history, and the notion of identity, are really central to the work of a lot of black artists. I mean, obviously it's also important to a lot of other artists as well, but I think specifically for us, identity is a critical issue, and it's reinforced wherever in the world we are. I think it's separate from the idea of racism. Obviously, racism informs the issue of identity, but it goes way beyond the issues of racism and discrimination. Identity is a constant friction within our minds.

*You've also done a series of one person exhibitions. What informed your choice of those artists?*

– I think the starting point for the one person shows I've worked on has been artists whose subject matter has embraced the black experience, embraced notions of black identity. And in that sense, Eugene Palmer and Michael Platt are excellent examples. As I say, my agenda has always been to encourage the establishment of an art form that clearly addresses the black experience. Now, obviously, artists like Platt and Palmer are not just seen in terms of being black artists, they're seen as being artists in a much wider, freer sense, but their work does address specific aspects of the black experience, and it's that that interests me.

*Yes, Platt, – an African American artist whose work you showed here in Britain for the first time in 1994 – that illustrates that you're also interested in the black experience elsewhere, and not just centred on black British artists.*

– Yes, absolutely. I'm always hesitant to pin a clear label on myself in terms of my ideas, in terms of politics, but if I have to, I'd say my ideas focus on Pan-Africanism. I would call myself a Pan-Africanist if I had to call myself anything, because I believe that people of African descent, spread throughout our diaspora, are linked. There are many things which we have in common.

*Historically and culturally?*

– Yes, historically, culturally and in terms of the contemporary experience. So it's for those reasons that I was quite keen to see artists from other parts of the black diaspora exhibited here; and similarly I've also had an interest in getting the work of British based black artists pushed out further afield. On the subject of Pan-Africanism, I feel very strongly that in Britain we have a body of black artists which, in the international sense, is very astutely aware of their international identity, or the international aspect of their identity. And having been to a number of places in the US

and Europe and so on, and seen the work of black artists, I don't think there's anything quite like the body of work there is here, in terms of its ability to address a wider community. If you look at the work of Keith Piper, Eugene Palmer and a number of other people, you will see international references, in terms of African communities, that you just won't find in other parts of the world. I know that's something you might argue with or disagree with.

*I would argue that for any artist, be they black or white, there will always be a kind of cross-referencing internationally, and certainly, modern art practice is premised upon a type of cultural exchange within the work.*

Yes, but I'm not talking about that so much – I'm talking about clear references to our political history . . .

*A common history?*

– Yes. For example, there are artists in Britain whose work has dealt with the issue of lynching in the US, and although it may exist, I have not yet seen a body of work by an artist in the US that addresses the British experience. When I was growing up, working with Keith Piper, Donald Rodney and those people, we were doing work on South Africa, anti-apartheid work, and we were taking our cues largely from the Black Power struggle in the US. The work was incredibly internationalist. I mean, if anything there was a problem in that it didn't sufficiently address the black experience in Britain. And I haven't seen an equivalent body of work around the world. I think other people's concerns are much more localised. I'm not saying that's a problem, but I do think in Britain we have a unique grasp of Pan-Africanism; it's a very vigorous and very alive issue.

*You mentioned this early group of young black artists who were working together, again through a series of exhibitions which in the 80s were called 'The Pan-Afrikan Connection'. What has happened to that early group?*

– Well, we disbanded in early 1984, and since then we've kind of gone our separate ways.

*The reason I enquired was to elicit what kind of changes might have taken place for young black artists who were initially exhibiting during the 80s. I wonder if they have been forced, or coerced, into abandoning their role as practising black artists, and whether, because of circumstances, they have had to take on other roles within the art community. If this is true, was it linked in any way to the influence of the 80s economy or other related phenomena?*

– I think there's been a real problem in terms of artists who abandon their practice. There are a number of artists who I think have been lost to the black community, because they've abandoned their practice in favour of desk-bound jobs, whether in the visual arts or otherwise. I don't think it's something which affects us to a disproportionate degree. When I was at art school, there

were probably 50 people in my year who graduated; I would be surprised if any more than two or three of those people maintain their practice in a consistent way. Obviously, there are people who become Sunday painters – I'm not saying that in a disparaging way – but you know, I don't think it's a problem which has a disproportionate effect on black people.

*Well, then, what have the problems been for black artists in the 80s and 90s, if any?*

– I think the biggest problem has been the racism of the art world and how it manifests itself; as a general umbrella problem. At the beginning of the 80s, black artists in Britain were a generic mass. If you like, they were kind of lumpen body. By 1986-87, four or five artists broke away from the pack, and those artists were deemed to be our 'best' artists. Since then, I think the problem for the mass of black artists has been a lack of exhibition opportunities which have been hogged by a mere handful of artists. I know that's a dreadful thing to say, but it's such a frustrating situation. Obviously I think it's in the nature of the artist to accept and seek opportunities to exhibit, but I think the reality is that, as a result, a large body of gifted black artists have been ignored.

*Can we concentrate for a moment on the few that have actually made it, or are attempting to make it in the British art scene? On what grounds do you think they are successful?*

– Well, I think the art world sees their work has having a sophistication and a richness that they approve of, or can relate to. I think these artists are seen as being OK because they're deemed to be highly visually literate.

*Could we have some names? I mean, who would you suggest is successful now as a black artist?*

– In terms of the African-Caribbean community of artists, I'd say, since the mid-80s, I think Keith Piper has probably been one of the most successful male artists. I think, in terms of women artists, Maud Sulter has developed, in recent years, into a very important black artist, and Sonia Boyce, obviously, is somebody who is very familiar to a lot of people. I think the South Asian body of artists is slightly different, but there is a kind of corresponding body of artists from that particular community.

*Do you think that British art institutions are looking for a particular type of imagery?*

– Oh, absolutely, I think they're looking for something which is, as I say, sophisticated. But I also think the art Establishment is looking for people it can embrace as 'one of us', 'people who can speak our language', and I don't think most of our painters have been taken on board in that sort of way.

*Since becoming a curator you've said that you feel you are being as creative in that field as you might have been as an artist.*

*Would you consider your curatorial role to be as influential, more so, than when you were an artist?*

– I believe my curatorial role has been more influential because as you mentioned earlier, I do see myself as working for the black artists who have been somewhat marginalised. I think the act of trying to secure exhibition space for that body of artists who might not otherwise be exhibited, is very important to me. The scale of the marginalisation of these artists is massive. Particularly if we consider that many of them are only able to exhibit their work in exhibitions such as those I curate, or smaller efforts at a community level. I think there are major problems and I don't think that the needs of these artists are being properly addressed at the moment.

*That brings us to what you might perceive as being the failings of the British mainstream institutions in providing for black artists. How do you view the situation, in terms of funding and in terms of exhibiting space, and so on?*

– I mean, I don't really want to take a kind of negative, pessimistic road, but I think that at the moment things are absolutely dreadful. (Laughter) I think, in the early 80s, there was this thing about 'Right, we've just had these amazing riots throughout the country,' and that translates, in its own kind of trickle-down way, into a pressure on public institutions, to have some kind of accountability, or to acknowledge in some way the people in the black community and, in this case, artists in the black community. I think what's happened, is that the art world is now saying, 'Right, there are a few artists who we will patronise . . . who we'll interact with . . . that there is a multicultural body of artists out there.' Of course, the problem is that I don't think that the process of patronising half a dozen artists is adequate because it means that there are several hundred artists in one area of the country who are left to wither. I think it's a really important point that racism in the art world, in terms of denying exhibition spaces to black artists, is a real problem, because I don't think art practice improves or develops through exhibition. I don't think an artist is going to improve or mature, or develop a high level of competence and accomplishment only in the studio. If you give an artist an opportunity to exhibit a major body of his or her work, then I think that process acts as a catalyst for that artist's work. So essentially, I don't like to say it, but I believe strongly that what we have in the black community is a body of artists whose work is actually stunted. I really hate to say that but I believe it strongly.

*And do you feel that this sort of stunting process has taken place over the past decade or so, or has the situation always been the same for black artists in this country? I'm really questioning if the situation is improving or deteriorating.*

– I think the situation is definitely not improving.

*I question whether this idea of a standoff isn't an improvement*

– So are you saying it is an improvement?

*I'm asking: isn't it an improvement? At least there's no active undermining of the black artists or . . .*

– Well, it depends on what you mean by 'active'. I think the act of ignoring people is very active, or it has an active repercussion. I don't think what we have at the moment is acceptable, but I think there's not a great deal that we can do about it. However, I am very hesitant to continue curating in the kinds of ways I have been curating. I have increasing difficulties with this idea that I exist to curate black exhibitions in an otherwise white exhibition programme. For years I was happy to do that, because I saw myself in a kind of pioneering role, but as soon as you start to think that you're actually suiting someone else's agenda, in terms of black slots, then the whole thing becomes much more problematic.

*I agree with you that exhibition exposure contributes to the development and maturity of an artist, and that the way in which their work is critiqued also helps artists to build confidence in what they have to say. I wonder if there is ever going to be a kind of way forward for black artists here, and if their circumstances aren't always going to remain limited by virtue of the problems that you've outlined.*

– I think the notions of 'British art' and 'black artists' are ultimately incompatible. I say that because, in order for a notion of British art to percolate and to have a currency, there's an implication that there's a body of black artists who are operating on a level playing field with their white counterparts, essentially equal.

It's like art in Jamaica: obviously, some of the issues which we've touched on can be translated to a Jamaican context, but at the same time, the major positive difference is that there, artists are all operating from a similar kind of plateau, and it's from that plateau that their work can be assessed, in terms of its differences and its similarities. I don't think that the work of black artists in Britain is free enough to be included in a general notion of 'British art', in a fair and equal way.

*Things have changed since the 80s, and we've had a lot of rhetoric with regard to the notion of British multiculturalism. Don't you see that as a way forward, in terms of how we assess these artists and how their work is reviewed and represented?*

– Well, I think the major problems with institutional notions such as 'multiculturalism' and, I suppose most recently, 'internationalism', which is another area altogether . . .

*Well, it isn't, surely it's an extension of the same principle.*

– No, no, no. I mean . . . (Laughter)

*You mean it's another minefield.*

– Yes, that's another minefield. I think the problem with these notions is that, whilst we can embrace the spirit of them quite

easily and quite readily, the way they find form, via the white Establishment, is always through a quota system. I don't really think the white Establishment is able to take on board the spirit of multiculturalism in a truly unfettered way.

*So is this the reason for your commitment to an agenda which, I suggest, is separatist?*

– Speaking candidly, whilst I've always had an idealistic agenda in terms of forging ever stronger links between black artists and the black community, I don't think that there's a great deal of evidence that those links have been adequately forged.

*But how, Eddie, can you suggest that you ought to be pursuing this independent agenda of promoting black British art, and to some extent promoting it exclusively, but through the agency of British exhibition institutions, with British institutional funding? Don't you think that you're biting the hand that feeds you?*

– I don't really feel I'm biting the hand that feeds me or anything like that, because I think British funding bodies have an obligation – though obviously I can't compel them to fund me or other black artists – to allocate funding to black artists in Britain. I think galleries should be pressed to show a wider body of artists than they do. I think you can ask me, in all fairness and in all honesty: 'is that sufficiently a priority? Shouldn't my priority be addressing the black community itself?' You could ask me that, and I would accept that as a valid question. But if you ask me that, then in some ways that leaves this whole other flank regarding institutional funding unaddressed.

*Obviously you take a position which is agitational rather than one of a mediator. Do you think that there's any value to taking a more passive approach to dealing with British art institutions? Do you think that more might be achieved by using a lighter touch?*

– No, I don't. I mean, I despair about the negative tone of our conversation, in parts. I think it's something which causes us both . . .

*Concern?*

– Concern and discomfort. I know that to talk primarily in terms of 'race' is often crude and vulgar, but you know, there is absolutely no evidence that any black person in the art world is ever going to be taken seriously in terms of their abilities. I don't think there's any evidence that a more cautious, mediating or hesitant position is going to reap any more rewards.

*Can I ask you what might seem to be a more fundamental question, based on my perceptions of what actually takes place here in Britain. My feeling has always been that there has been a preoccupation, a preponderance of interest in race as an issue, and a lot of energy is diverted into a perceived struggle with British art institutions. By contrast, in other countries, in black countries, artists obviously get on with their work and they don't*

*have to tackle issues of identity in the same sort of confrontational way. Do you think that there's a way forward by deflating the black issue, the notion of a black aesthetic and the problems that are inherent in taking such a clear-cut separatist stance?*

– I understand the question you're asking, and I'm glad you've asked it. In response to it, I think that, whilst on the one hand there's been a black presence in Britain for hundreds of years, on the other hand our generation of black people have only been here for a limited period. I think we're in an evolutionary process, and I think five or ten years down the line we could have a completely different situation *vis-à-vis* the work of black artists and British art. When I meet artists who've graduated in the past couple of years or so, although I can see in their work a very distinct black subject matter, their concerns and a lot of their sensibilities are completely different from mine.

*Yes, I'm asking is there any benefit to that type of evolution, where one moves away from separatist issues into something more collective, more international, more Post-Modern even?*

– Essentially what we're talking about is a process of assimilation, don't you think?

*And is there benefit to that?*

– I'm not sure we can see it in terms of benefits or lack of benefits. I just think it's an inevitable process, although I also think assimilation brings with it a technical estrangement from our countries of origin.

*And you don't wish to see that, obviously, as a Pan-Africanist?*

– Well, I don't, but technically, people born in the 70s or even the early 80s, I think for them, even 'Jamaica', or the 'Caribbean', are going to be removed entities. Because in a sense, my own bridge to Jamaica is my parents.

*It's a relatively strong one, I imagine.*

– Yes, I know that my parents were born in Jamaica, I know where they were born in Jamaica, I know that that's where they're from. Now, if you look at children born in Basildon, Rotherham or wherever, in 1972 or 1981, that connection with Jamaica, Nigeria, Ghana, or wherever, becomes more and more tenuous.

*Yes, and by the same token, they then have to make their investments here in this country.*

– Exactly.

*Also, they have to stake a claim for their creativity in this country and through the institutions of this country. To what extent should that claim be based on old notions which are separatist, as opposed to a new way of looking at identity which is . . .*

– I will never stop believing that artists have an obligation to address and to bear in mind the political realities of the communities that produce them. I will never encourage artists to turn

their backs on direct dialogues with their communities. What you're suggesting is that in order to move forward, artists need to turn their backs on the political realities of what's happening to their brothers, their sisters, their cousins, their uncles, and so on and so forth. Unfortunately, by virtue of being involved in the arts, there is an inevitable estrangement from the black community. However, I think black artists cannot afford to forget our communities, we can't forget those realities. We can't forget police brutality, we can't forget deaths in police custody. I don't think we could pursue a kind of Post-Modernist dream at the expense of what's happening to our people.

*We've assumed that we're using the term 'black art' in a way which is clearly understood, but I know that in the early 80s the problem of definition, and how one defined black art, was one which plagued you, particularly around an exhibition like 'Plotting the Course'. I wonder if, ten years on, the notion of black art is any more clearly defined?*

– In the early 80s, my working definition of black art was that it was art by black people, for black people, about black people and that it was art that specifically addressed the black experience, the political conditions and so on and so forth. Some of that I think we've touched on previously, and my thinking was very much that by 'black' I was referring to people of African origin – African-Caribbean and African origin. Now, I haven't really ever stopped thinking that that is the only plausible definition of 'black', and all the exhibitions I worked on between 1981 and 1987 were of African and Caribbean artists. By the time it got down to 'Plotting the Course', which was in 1988, I think what happened was that I was kind of overwhelmed, steamrolled by this other view that 'black' should include all sorts of other people beyond the African diaspora.

*Now this other view was one which had developed out of a kind of a multicultural debate.*

– That's right, yes. This was the view that 'black' had to embrace, or should embrace, people beyond the African diaspora. Although, I've never really stopped believing that 'black' is really a term that belongs exclusively to us as African people.

*People of African descent?*

– People of African origin. But I have to say that the multicultural definition of 'black', as it snowballed throughout the 80s, has been quite considerable. So much so, that now, even though I have to do an 'oral-double' take, I think a lot of my practice has reflected that.

*Well, certainly in exhibitions that you've curated, you have gone out of your way to ensure that people of other racial origins have been included.*

– That's right. But the shows that you're talking about, Petrine – shows such as 'Plotting the Course' and my self-portrait show,<sup>5</sup> –

were exhibitions where publicity material was sent out, I think quite widely, and it was up to the artists to respond to what they saw in this blurb. It was the artists' choice as to whether they wanted to identify with what I was doing and my working definitions of the term black.

*Are you not selective in your curatorial practice now, don't you pinpoint the artists that you wish to work with?*

- Yes, but I like to think my practice has matured, that I've moved on considerably from those early, quite cumbersome exhibitions, to exhibitions such as the Michael Platt exhibition, the Eugene Palmer retrospective. I like to think that these have been much more considered and focused exhibitions.

*Yes, but do you think that you'd say the same for your art practice? I know that your output is more limited now that you are curating, but you do exhibit occasionally. Would you say that you would see the same process of maturation taking place in how you communicate black issues through your work?*

- I would like to think so, but I'm hesitant to say that, because I

think what you're really talking about is a process of dilution. I think that's what has happened to the work of a lot of black British artists in the 80s. I don't think it's a maturing process.

*It's an accommodating one.*

- Yes, I think it's a process of compromise; I think it's a process of work being toned down to suit 'other' palates, 'other' tastes. And I don't like the idea that my practice may have undergone that transition.

*Dr Petrine Archer-Straw is a Jamaican Art Historian and is currently lecturing at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, she is also a freelance curator and writer.*

*Eddie Chambers was born in Wolverhampton in 1960. He began organising exhibitions with a group of Black art students, including Keith Piper, in 1980. He has since curated a large number of exhibitions of work by Black artists in Britain and abroad. In 1989 he established the African and Asian Visual Artist's Archive, a Black artists' research and reference facility. He has also written extensively on the subject of Black visual art practice. Eddie Chambers lives in Bristol.*

#### Notes

- 1 'Black People and the British Flag', The Corner House, Manchester, 1993; The City Gallery, Leicester, 1993.
- 2 'Us and Dem', The Storey Institute, Lancaster, 1994.
- 3 'History and Identity', The Norwich Gallery, Norwich, 1991.
- 4 'Black Art Plotting the Course', Oldham Art Gallery, Oldham, and touring, 1988.
- 5 'Let the Canvas Come to Life With Dark Faces', Coventry Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry, and touring, 1990.